

New birds for Nigeria observed during the Lake Chad Bird Migration Project

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Un projet concernant les oiseaux migrateurs a été mis en œuvre dans le nord-est du Nigéria, sur la rive occidentale du lac Tchad, en 2000, après des visites préliminaires dans la zone à partir de 1997. Pendant l'exécution du projet, six espèces nouvelles pour le Nigéria ont été observées, l'Aigle des steppes *Aquila (rapax) nipalensis*, l'Engoulevent à collier roux *Caprimulgus ruficollis*, l'Engoulevent doré *C. eximius*, la Prinia aquatique *Prinia fluviatilis*, le Cratéope fauve *Turdoides fulvus* et l'Étourneau caronculé *Creatophora cinerea*, ainsi que deux espèces dont la présence restait à confirmer, l'Aigle pomarin *Aquila pomarina* et la Rousserolle verderolle *Acrocephalus palustris*. La Prinia aquatique était assez commune dans son habitat normal, tandis que l'Engoulevent doré et l'Aigle des steppes semblaient être des visiteurs ou hôtes de passage réguliers.

Introduction

The Lake Chad basin, centred within the dry Sahel zone immediately south of the Sahara, is a major topographical feature of the northern savannas of Africa (Fig 1). North-east Nigeria, along the shores of the lake, received considerable ornithological attention in the past. During the 1960s and early 1970s Dr A J Hopson, director of the Lake Chad Research Institute, at Malamfatori, studied the area's avifauna^{4,9,10}, while in the late 1960s, Malamfatori became the base for the British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) expeditions working on Palearctic migrants^{2,3,5}. But since the 1970s, the area has been little visited by ornithologists. The observations described in this paper were made in October 1997, October–November 1998, April and November 1999, and February–May and August–November 2000, during reconnaissance for and the ringing programme of the Lake Chad Bird Migration Project, in the vicinity of Malamfatori^{6–8,11}. This intense field work produced observations of six species new to Nigeria, plus observations of two species of previously 'unconfirmed' status⁴.

Study area

The observations presented here were made in an area largely bordered by the roads between Cross Kauwa–Malamfatori–Baga–Cross Kauwa (Fig 1). Other observations were made along the Yobe River from Yo–Abadam–Bosso–Kaniram and at the Yobe River mouth at Doro. Some records also derive from islands in western Lake Chad. Most time was spent within an area c6 km east and south of the Lake Chad Research Institute's old fishery research station at Duguri, 5 km south of Malamfatori town, which was the temporary base of the Lake Chad Bird Observatory. In the late

1960s, when it was the base for the BOU expeditions, the station was by the lakeshore, but it is now surrounded by farmland at the edge of a rather dense savanna, which invaded the former lake bottom when the northern lake basin dried out in the droughts of the 1970s–1980s. Agricultural rather than fishery studies are now undertaken here. Species included in this paper are those not mentioned or considered 'not confirmed' by Elgood⁴.

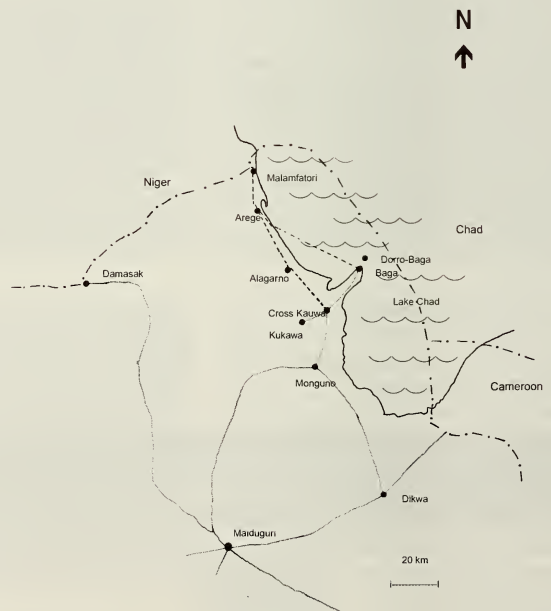


Figure 1. Map of the study area in north-east Nigeria; note that the shoreline of Lake Chad shown here is not the current one.

Species new to Nigeria

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*

Two, one juvenile and one adult, were observed on 8 November 1998, north-west of Baga, along the road to Mitile. They were initially identified by their silhouette: broad rounded wings, short tail and slightly drooping outer wings. The juvenile was dark brown with paler brown wing-coverts, with a narrow wing-band formed by pale tips to the greater coverts on the upper side. The adult was darker, but still had contrasting, paler underwing-coverts and was in moult. A second juvenile was observed on 16 October 2000, between Cross Kauwa and Alagarno. It was in fresh plumage with yellowish-brown wing-coverts and clear white tips to the greater coverts forming a narrow wing-band. There is an earlier record of a bird south of Maiduguri, tentatively identified as *A. pomarina*, but the record lacks substantiation¹.

Steppe Eagle *Aquila (rapax) nipalensis*

Two first-years, both having a broad white wingbar on the underwing, were observed between Baga and Mitile, on 8 November 1998. Other characters were the pale brown ground colour, pale trailing edge to the wing and silhouette with level and narrow S-curved wings. Direct comparison with other raptors, eg Tawny *A. rapax* and Booted Eagles *Hieraetus pennatus* was made. On 27 November 1999, two more juveniles were observed between Arege and Alagarno, c30 km south of Malamfatori, and on 10 November 2000, c6 were between Mitile and Baga. It appears that the area west of Lake Chad may be a regular passage or wintering site for Steppe Eagle.

Red-necked Nightjar *Caprimulgus ruficollis*

One found dead on the road close to Cross Kauwa, on 7 November 1998. A second was flushed, on 15 March 2000, at a ringing site in an area of farmland, saltbush *Salvadora persica* and *Acacia* savanna. The observer first thought it was a Long-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus climacurus* (the most common *Caprimulgus* here). Subsequently two were present; their size appeared too large for female Long-tailed (or a male in non-breeding plumage). Both had c1/4 of the outertail feathers white, a distinct reddish hindneck, a large white spot below the cheek and, in flight, a distinct white area on the primaries and reddish-brown underwing-coverts. Distinct bands were obvious on the wing-coverts when at rest, and starting at each 'shoulder' there was a pale band across the back. They were extremely well camouflaged and very difficult to locate on the ground. On at least one occasion we heard a *chokk* call. By dusk we returned to the station and searched the literature; it appeared

that they were Red-necked Nightjars. The sound was similar to the display sound of that species, of which we had a tape. Regular 'display' was heard each morning until we left the area, on 11 May. On 10 May we attempted to tape-lure one into a net. It reacted immediately to playback of Red-necked Nightjar, flying towards the net, but without being trapped. Given our records of regular display, it is possible that the species is resident, rather than just a winter visitor to this area. It is known from neighbouring Chad and Mali.

Golden Nightjar *Caprimulgus eximius*

One was found dead on the road between Monguno and Cross Kauwa, on 7 November 1998, 2–3 more were found dead there the following day and on 9 November a live bird was seen in the headlights of a car. Two were found dead south of Cross Kauwa, on 26 and 27 November 1999. Another live individual was observed south of Duguri, on 23 October 2000 and up to ten more were found dead on the road between Cross Kauwa and Maiduguri in October–November 2000. All had the characteristic golden-yellow plumage with silvery-grey spots on the mantle and wing-coverts, and white patch on the outer primaries. Feathers from one of these birds were depicted on the cover of *J. Avian Biol.* in 2001 (Fig 2). These records may indicate an extension of



Figure 2. Front cover of *J. Avian Biol.* 32 (2001), showing feathers from Golden Nightjar *Caprimulgus eximius* found dead on a road at Malamfatori (reproduced with permission of *J. Avian Biol.*).

the species' range from further north, in Chad, Niger and Mali, where it is mainly resident, although it is now known south of 14°N in Burkina Faso¹.

Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*

A first-year was mist-netted and ringed in a reedbed near Malamfatori, on 16 September 2000, as part of regular ringing work at the site during autumn 2000 (see Fig 7 in Ottosson *et al*¹¹). A first-year Reed Warbler *A. scirpaceus* was mist-netted simultaneously, permitting direct in-hand comparisons. In distinguishing Marsh Warbler from Reed Warbler we followed the protocol described by Svensson¹³. The general jizz differed from that of Reed Warbler in the shorter bill and shorter hind claw. Most striking were the legs, feet and claws, which were straw-yellow, not grey as in Reed Warbler. The Marsh Warbler had paler, slightly more olive-brown (not rufous-brown) upperparts, especially the rump, which lacked all rufous tones. The dark brown tertials were diffusely, but clearly edged yellowish; this feature is not shown by Reed Warbler. The Marsh Warbler had very fresh plumage and the inner six primaries were tipped off-white. The alula was relatively dark and contrasted with the rest of the wing. A second first-year Marsh Warbler was trapped on 4 October 2000. The first individual measured: wing 70 mm, second primary notch 9.5 mm, third primary 51.5 mm, first primary to primary-covert -2 mm, tail 57 mm, bill to skull 17.6 mm, bill to base of feathering 12.7 mm, bill width 3.8 mm, tarsus 22.5 mm and hind claw 6.6 mm; weight 9.9 g. The second measured: wing 68 mm, second primary notch 9.5 mm, third primary 51 mm and tarsus 22.6 mm; weight 9.9 g. A previous record of one mist-netted at Malamfatori, on 7 September 1965, was considered doubtful by Dowsett³ and not mentioned by Urban *et al*¹⁴. One other record in West Africa, a bird reportedly in song in Senegal¹², apparently lacks supporting evidence.

River Prinia *Prinia fluviatilis*

First observed on an island in Lake Chad, close to Baga, in November 1997 and subsequently found at the same location, on 9 November 1998. During the trapping programme at Malamfatori one was ringed in April 1999 and 38 in 2000 (see Fig 6 in Ottosson *et al*¹¹). All were trapped at sites close to or within water, at what we termed the 'wet sites'. River Prinia is very similar to Tawny-flanked Prinia *P. subflava* but is paler and has a different call and song. Tawny-flanked Prinia is not very common around Malamfatori and was always observed in dry habitat, not in 'wet' areas. The underparts of River Prinia lack all brownish tones, with upperparts cold grey (unlike *subflava*,

which has brownish upperparts). Also useful in their separation was the more contrasting head pattern of *fluviatilis*, with clear white supercilium and darker brown lores. Legs darker than *subflava*. Call higher pitched than *subflava* and song different, more pure and less grating than latter. The discovery of River Prinia in this region is relatively unsurprising, given that it is known from areas south of Lake Chad in Cameroon and Chad¹¹.

Fulvous Babbler *Turdoides fulvus*

One was observed 1 km south of our field station at Duguri, on 20, 25 and 30 March 2000. It initially flew from a saltbush in front of the car. The shape and flight immediately led thoughts to a babbler, of which the observer (DB) had seen several species in other parts of Africa. Unfortunately the bird disappeared without being specifically identified. Five days later, at exactly the same site, good views were eventually obtained of possibly the same bird, which was easily identified as a Fulvous Babbler. The long tail, brown upperparts, fulvous underparts, white throat, dark bill and dark eyes were all noted. In autumn, on 15 September 2000, a small flock of four was seen at the same place. This species may also be expanding its range southward in response to increasing desertification.

Wattled Starling *Creatophora cinerea*

Three on 21 August 2000, 2 km east of the old Fishery Station at Duguri, were observed from 25 m in a treetop with a flock of Greater Blue-eared Glossy Starlings *Lamprolanius chalybaeus* for a couple of minutes before they flew away. They had a very pale overall impression. The body was pale greyish brown with a conspicuous off-white rump. The belly was whitish, and tail and wing feathers blackish. The pointed bill was pale yellowish, with bare yellow and black skin surrounding it, as well as behind the eye and lores. Legs were pale brown. They were approximately the size of the Greater Blue-eared Glossy Starlings and the appearance was that of a typical *Sturnus* starling, short tailed and bulky bodied.

Unconfirmed observations

Three Barbary Falcon *Falco (peregrinus) peregrinoides* and one or two Saker *F. cherrug* sightings were made, but the observations were so brief that proper descriptions could not be made. These species probably occur in the area and future observers should attempt to confirm their presence.

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